

*Rum's Memories - 1938 – 1945 –
Written by Sylvia Gardiner 2007*

1938

On 17 January 1938 I joined the Express Dairy Company at their Bostall Branch at 305 Brampton Road, Bexleyheath as an *Office Junior*. I was 14. Dad had taken me up there the first morning to show me where to go.



The hours were 9.00 – 6.00 Monday to Saturday and my first week's wage was 17s 6d. You were required to work late on Friday nights as it was the day when the milkmen collected the money from the customers on their round. Working in the office, which was situated on the ground floor behind the shop, was Joan Smith, Miss Heffernon (*Chief Clerk*), and Mr Enoch Hughes who was Manager.

In those days it was very formal at work and everyone was called Mr, Mrs or Miss and their surname. Being as I was young (a month over 14 years) and my surname was Rumble someone said that they would call me 'Rum'. The name has stayed with me all my life. Everyone at work always knew me as 'Rum' and even now in old age lots of people still call me by that name.

I cycled to and from work every day travelling down Long Lane and into Woolwich Road and cut through North Street into the Broadway. It took me about 20 minutes and I was happy that I had no fares to pay. I was even able to go home each day for lunch and thus was able to save money.

In 1938 there were 11 rounds and about 20 milkmen who worked at the branch. Their mess room was upstairs where they would cook snacks of egg and bacon while they were waiting for their 2nd round to commence. In those days there were two deliveries per day – one in the morning and one later in the day.

Each customer had a card and it showed how much they owed at the end of the week. My job was writing up the Round Books and adding the amount to be charged. Customers paid their bills weekly - normally on a Friday.

The world news, however, was getting bad – there were feelings that a world war was imminent. At the end of Summer 30 September 1938 our Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, met Adolf Hitler in Germany and it was smoothed over. He believed this meeting had secured "*Peace in our Time*" – we breathed a sigh of relief and got on with our lives.

Embassy Ballroom



How many people today can remember the Embassy Ballroom ¹in Welling? It was built in 1930's and proved to be an extremely popular dance hall which was well known in South East London.

In the 1940s Stan Atkins Orchestra were very popular.

My younger sister and I used to go to special jazz evenings which then would cost two bob (2/-) 2 shillings in old money and ten new pence) and listen to a brilliant young band leader and arranger called **John Dankworth** who had an equally young singer called **Cleo Laine**. They married each other and became very famous.

¹ *The Embassy Rooms and Dance Hall eventually closed down in the 1960's when the area was redeveloped.*

1939

Things took a turn for the worst when, in the late summer of 1939 when Hitler's army marched into Poland attacking all Jews. They took their money from them then herded them into trains and took them away from their homes and families. Children and parents were separated. It was terrible.

Shortly after, on 3 September 1939, we, England, declared war on Germany. Everyone, on that Sunday morning, went mad when the first air raid warning had started up as nobody knew what to do. Everyone was rushing around not knowing whether to stand, run, shut the windows, hide under the tables - but luckily, shortly after, the "All Clear" sounded and everyone breathed a sigh of relief - all was well on that occasion.



Everyone was issued with Air Raid shelters which had to be erected in their garden's - dug in by each family. Neighbours often helped each other. There were 'Anderson' Shelters and 'Morrison' Shelters but most people had an Anderson Shelter outside in the garden like this one shown here.



Blackout blinds were needed for every window and identity cards and gas masks were issued to each person together with ration books for milk, butter, eggs, bacon, meat, sugar & sweets.

Every household was busy getting their homes prepared for war. Men were taken out of their jobs and young boys took over the Milkman's jobs with older men coming out of retirement to help.

Our whole way of life was soon to change - in a way we could never have imagined. All seemed quiet until the following year of 1940.

1940

Air raids started in the summer of 1940 the news of our men in the Army was grim. Germany had raced through Poland, Belgium and France and cut off our soldiers to the shores of Dunkirk and other coasts where a miracle took place. Every kind of ships available, large and small were used to take our soldiers home to England. German planes were dive bombing our soldiers as they scrambled into the boats and some soldiers panicked and had to be pushed off the boats into the sea. It was hell let loose.

After that evacuation of our troops all was quiet until Saturday 7 September 1940 when the Germans came over and bombed the Woolwich Arsenal and Silver Town. It was awful. They kept the bombing up during the afternoon - then all went quiet. It started again in the evening and lasted all night. It was devastating. Hundreds of people got killed at both places.

We were all at work as usual that Saturday afternoon at the Express Dairy Office in Bostall Heath and we could hear the bombs dropping nearby. We were only a stone's throw away from Woolwich Arsenal as the crow flies. It was so terrible. We could only imagine what those poor people were going through and yet could do nothing to help them. That day was the start of the Blitz.

Years later we were to find out that one boy - John Gardiner - had been working at the Woolwich Arsenal in the morning and had had a very lucky escape indeed that Saturday afternoon. After cycling home for lunch, he did not feel well and did not want to go back to work. His Mum said that

perhaps he should stay at home. He decided that would be a good idea. That one decision saved his life. The workshop where he worked

was destroyed and if he had cycled back to work as he should have that afternoon he would have surely been killed too.

Others were not so lucky. Our Chief Clerk, Rene Merrett's parents kept the butchers shop at Parkside Parade, Barnehurst and they had a direct hit on their Air Raid shelter. Her Dad was killed outright and her Mum and sister were buried in the rubble but were pulled out alive. Miraculously they were only shaken up but very frightened.

We all went to work the next morning and it was awful for us at the Express Dairy knowing what had taken place.

Up until this time I had been going into the Co-op shelters where the young butchers were, but I remembered Rene Merrett's Dad saying she was responsible for me, and consequently, it was decided that I was not allowed to use the Co-op shelter anymore. It was a great shame as it was good fun with the butcher boys! But this was War and such advice had to be taken seriously.

1941

Things remained the same. The Blitz continued until 10 May 1941. There were bombings nearby with land mines in King Harold's Way – with all our forces being beaten back.

News seemed grim.

1942

Things were much the same as war raged on but more young fellows were joining up and old men joined the Express Dairy to cover the rounds. Rounds were divided into zone areas. United Dairies, Express Dairy and the Co-op were the only ones to serve where they wanted to.

One day when I was making the tea at Brampton Road office a young lad came up to see Mr Lake, our Manager. We met on the stairs and he said "Hello". He seemed very nice and I liked the look of this young lad. It was many months before we met again - in fact, it was on a Good Friday – 4 April 1942 when I found out that his name was John - John Gardiner. Before the zoning started I'd only seen him when I was in the office - until that Good Friday.

He was a yard boy for a few weeks when he spoke up and said he wanted 'Round' work. He was then offered a round - Round No 2389 serving King Harold's Way going through to Bedonwell Road.

After a short while, John Gardiner then applied for a bigger round - Round No 2397 and served down as far as Plumstead. The extra distance meant that he had to use an electric motored van and for this he had to take a test.

Mr Bean had the round before him and strange as it seems John's Mother knew Grace, Mr Bean's wife and her step-Sister, Doris Fuel. Doris Fuel worked as a clerk at our Welling Branch. She also knew a Mrs Shepherd that worked in the Dairy at 284 Broadway, Bexleyheath. What a small world!

Two other coincidences were that my sister was working as a Hairdresser in Plumstead and John served her shop! He also served a house in Woodbrooke Road, Welling which was owned by the Glazebrook family. Years later their son, Charlie, married John's sister, Elsie. Young lads used to help the milkman and Mick was John's helper on Saturdays or school holidays. Here is John on his milk round.



From that Good Friday came another meeting linking our paths. One of the older girls named Phyllis Broomfield said how her sister was friendly with a Phyllis Holt who was engaged to John Gardiner's brother called Arthur. She was a Round's Lady at the Express Dairy Bexleyheath and said if I wanted John as a boy friend it was best if I tried not to giggle so much as boys did not like giggling girls.

I wondered whether John Gardiner thought I was stupid as I was always giggling and I imagined that he must have found it tiresome. I normally listened to other people's advice, and this occasion was no different. I stopped giggling and to my surprise a short time after I found that the advice had actually worked. John asked me out!

One afternoon, my friend, Mabel Salt and I decided to go for a walk to Bostall Woods – passing by the shops in Brampton Road. As we approached the Express Yard I noticed that the dog which used to follow the milkmen was still hanging around. Instinctively I knew that John must be still be at work in the Yard.



Mabel and I stopped just outside the Express and it was not long before I was proved right. Reg Dowling came out with John who was eating a piece of chocolate. As luck would have it they were walking in our direction. When Reg saw me he joked asking John when he was going to take 'Rum' out?

John came over and shared his chocolate with Mabel and me and then said,

"Well I could take you to the pictures". I could not believe my luck. Then he added:

"I'll bring a friend". I smiled but my heart sunk as we went our separate ways.

Just my luck, I thought, as Mabel and I walked in the direction of the Woods. I felt really excited having just made arrangements to meet up with John - but deep down inside I feared that maybe John would chose Mabel instead of me - and that I would have to make do with his friend! Of course, I kept these thoughts to myself but during our walk I prayed that he would chose me and not Mabel.



On that first date he brought along his friend, Fred Hussey. The four of us went to *The Regal* in Bexleyheath to see 'Dive Bomber'. – and I could not believe it when John chose to sit with me - leaving Mabel with Fred. They went out for a while, but their friendship did not last very long.

To my utter disbelief, John and I continued to go out. Working in the office – I saw him every day. Sometimes we met after work and went to the *New Cross Empire* to see Music Hall Turns – famous comedians of the day such as Max Miller and Charlie Chester. Sometimes we cycled up to Greenwich straight after work. I did not mind where we went as long as we were together.

It was the loveliest time of my life. I went everywhere by bike – a big black 'Roadster' as they were called. The make of the Bike was a Northern Firm called a 'Flight'. I had never gone out much before. I was almost 16 years old when war was declared and up until then I had liked being at home

with my Mum. I was always telling her the happenings of my life at work which she always found very interesting. Now it was different - I wanted to be with John!



As the months past by all seemed fairly quiet with the air raids and I was enjoying the nights out with John. He was soon to have his 18th birthday on 14 June 1942. I remember it so well. I had brought him a beautiful leather wallet as a present. It was my sister Joyce's idea and one which went down well.

When we could not get out because of the blackout we continued to see each other mostly at his home at 55 Pembury Road. As I got to know his family more, I was most surprised to learn that one of our most regular customers, Mrs Bassett, was John's Auntie Eva. I spoke regularly to her on the telephone when she rang into the branch and always thought her such a lovely lady. I was quite impressed to find out that she was a member of his family!

I was so happy and looking forward to Christmas together. Then came the awful day of John being called up. He received his calling up papers - out of the blue - just before Christmas of 1942. He was only 18½ - too young to go to war. Although being 6 months older, I was already 19 - and still had not received mine. He had to go - he had no choice - but I found it hard to remain cheerful for I was fearful for him.

We all spent an awfully sad Christmas that year. His sisters and especially his Mum was very upset to be sending her youngest son to war and so it was a sad and apprehensive time just before he left. He was told to report to Pwllheli in Wales to do his training in January 1943. His round was to be taken over by an older man - one of many who were drafted in to take the younger men's jobs while they were away fighting in the war.

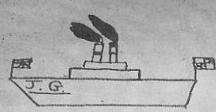
On his departure I remember saying to John that I feared he would find another girlfriend when he went away, but he told me not to be silly and sent me a lovely letter - my first love letter - in which he told me that he would never have anyone else. This, of course, helped me deal with the sadness of his departure.

That Christmas of 1942 was a truly sombre affair as we all spent time thinking of what was to happen in the coming months.

Someone else was sad that John was joining the Navy too. Mick the 'milk boy' who helped John on the Round - and he sent him the following letter.

5/12/42. 11% Crocus Rd
Welling
Kent.

DEAR JOHN
I hope you like the MAX
Will you come to see me
when you have leave
next. What is the name
of your ship. My mum was
so shocked when I told
her you were going
in the navy. Can't be left
helped her it John
Do you want your bike
any more and money bag
if not can I have them
I go out with George
George now so it is
not so bad is it when
you turn over you'll
find your ship there
waiting for you to ride
on. See. Please answer



- The navy's flag I mean the
navy's union jack. Here it is
well I had better go to
bed. I remain
your's Mick
Mick the milk
boy
X X X X X X X X
X X X X X X X X

	The navy's union jack.	20 days to Xmas ain't it?
The ship's name is →	Johnny Gardner	Hurry up and come back cause I miss you

ANSWER MY LETTER EVEN
IF IT'S ONLY A FEW WORDS